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ABSTRACT

A study examined sex differences in the usage and perceptions of profanity. Subjects, 135 undergraduate students (61 females and 74 males), completed a questionnaire requesting information about demographics, attitudes, and use of profanity. The initial series of questions sought to obtain a self-reported estimate of the frequency with which respondents used profanity in daily speech. Female respondents reported significantly less frequent use of profanity than did males. In all but a single instance (use of profanity in mixed company) female respondents said they felt the use of profanity would be less appropriate than males said it would be. Male respondents were more inclined than females to report that profanity provided a linguistic tool with which to demonstrate the social power of the speaker, and they were also more likely than females to report that profanity helped make the user socially acceptable. When asked to rate 16 commonly used terms on a six-point scale, males and females surprisingly rated the words similarly, except for religious profanity, in which the ratings provided by males were more severe than those given by females. (HTH)

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Sex Differences in Reported Profanity Uses and Perceptions

by

Gary W. Selnow

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Profane words play a peculiar role in the language. Depending on the context of use, they may serve to provide linguistic bonding among interactants while coincidentally functioning to alienate others from group membership. Their use may contribute to the establishment of dominant and submissive roles in a relationship and in some environments may furnish a medium through which a hierarchy among interactants is established. Language, it is argued, serves the reciprocal role of reflecting shifts in society while simultaneously contributing to the character of that society. We look to language as an indicator of deeper currents and we suspect its use has something to do with maintaining patterns evident in society and bringing about change. This paper looks at profanity as a source of communication power and control and in this context considers the implications of usage differences between the sexes.

Sex Differences in Language Use

Over the years scholars have reported a variety of language differences between the sexes. One of the earliest writers on the topic, Otto Jesperson, wrote, in 1922, that among other dimensions, women's language differs from that of men's in the selection of vocabulary and formation of sentence structure. Men swear more, use more slang and coarse language, and are disposed more to build puns into their speech. By contrast, he claimed women avoid "rough" language, use a greater number of euphemisms and generally have a more limited vocabulary (Jespersen, 1922). In terms of sentence structure, men develop more complicated

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sentences involving imbedded clauses. Women construct sentences Jespersen described as "a string of pearls" where thoughts are linked one after the other by conjunctions. He attributed these language differences to the "superior readiness of the speech of women," which he described as a female predilection to talk as soon as she has formed a thought (Jespersen,1922). Recent writings have been based on more rigorous research.

Kramer (1975) found that subjects of both sexes who are asked to identify cartoon captions as products of a male or female speaker characterized women's speech according to the stereotypes of "stupid, vague, emotional, confused and wordy."(Kramer, 1975) Male speech, on the other hand, was identified to be logical, concise, businesslike and in control. In a content analysis of language samples Glesler, et al. (1959) found that females used a greater number of words implying emotion and feeling while males selected words relating to time, space, quantity and destructive action. Others have confirmed that women's speech contains a greater emotional component (Wood, 1966; Barron,1971; Bernard, 1970). Women's language has been found to be more polite (Lakoff, 1973), and cheerful (Brend, 1972). It has patterns of weakness (Kramer, 1974) and uncertainty (Lakoff, 1973), and is "person oriented" rather than "thing oriented" as in male usage (Barron, 1971; Warshay, 1972).

Adelaide (1981) discovered that even in conversations among young children (4, 8 & 12 years) there were clearly sex differences in topic selection and style of interaction. In same-sex dyads, males discussed sports and location; females talked about school, identity, wishing and needing. In mixed-sex interactions, males made more direct requests and used more sound effects (Adelaide, 1981).

In consideration of the <u>control function</u> of speech, Chesler (1971)

found that through language, males more often direct a communication interaction. Males are more likely to interrupt females in a conversation (and so dominate the conversation) (Zimmerman and West, 1975; Candace, 1979). Moreover, they maintain control by greater speech intensity (Markel, et al., 1972). The forceful male style is exemplified by the use of direct questions, where females more often provide tag questions demonstrating greater timidity (Lakoff, 1973). Young females are reported to be more verbally compliant in dyadic interactions with young males (Adeline,1981).

Of these and a variety of other language differences reported in the literature it is, perhaps, the use of "strong" language which marks most obvious differences between male and female speech patterns. Such differences were evident in the seminal works of Jespersen (1922) who claimed that women do not swear as much as men nor do they use as much slang. More contemporary writings have reported similar observations. Kramer (1975) found that respondents perceive women's speech to be weaker and to incorporate fewer exclamations and curse words. Lakoff (1973) characterizes the stereotypical uses of strong language with examples of expletives she claims are typically used by females ("oh dear," "goodness," or "oh, fudge") and males ("shit," "damn"). She suggests that the relative forcefulness of these expletives may be a function of "how strongly one allows oneself to feel about something, so that the strength of an emotion conveyed in a sentence corresponds to the strength of the particle." (Lakoff, 1975:10) Consequently, stronger and more forceful statements made by men tend to reinforce their position of strength in the world.

A handful of empirical studies has explored sex differences in listener

perceptions of speakers who use profanity. Mulac (1976) reported both male and female users of profanity were given poor marks by listeners, irrespective of listener sex. Cohen and Saine (1977) found males downgraded male users of profanity more severely than female users did, and female raters gave male users of profanity lower marks than female users. This appears to be one of the only studies to report that evaluators were more charitable to profanity users of the opposite sex.

The questions posiced for this study deal primarily with sex differences in the usage and perceptions of profanity. Underlying these discussions, however, are two issues which stand as important items of public debate. Some writers contend male speech (characterized, in part, by its profanity content) facilitates male ties, and swearing, furthermore, functions to exclude females from traditionally male settings (e.g. Thorne and Henley, 1975). A second issues deals with the notion that "strong" language used by males contributes to the maintenance of male domination in mixed-sex interactions (e.g. Lakoff,1973). These two positions stand as shadows over the findings of this research.

Five questions preoccupy this study:

1. Is there a measurable sex difference in the reported frequency of profanity use?
2. Are there sex differences in respondent assessments of when profanity use is and is not appropriate?
3. Are there sex differences in the reported perceptions of the role profanity plays in language?
4. Are there sex differences in respondent background characteristics which

may have an effect on the uses and perceptions of profanity?

5. Are there sex differences in respondent ratings of profane words?

Method

The sample consisted of 135 undergraduate students (61 females and 74 males) representing a fairly heterogeneous mix of academic majors and class years. Most of the respondents were raised in the eastern United States; hometowns of this sample were fairly well spread along a rural-urban continuum.

Each respondent completed a questionnaire which requested information about hometown setting, family demographics, religious orientations, church attendance, media consumption patterns and other details about daily habits. The questionnaire solicited information about the respondents' use of profanity, then presented a series of items dealing with attitudes toward the use of profanity in a number of social settings. Subjects were asked finally to evaluate the degree of obscenity for items on a list of profane words. These words were extracted from lists developed by Cameron (1970).

Results

1. Frequency of Profanity Use/ 2. Appropriateness of Use

The initial series of questions sought to obtain a self reported estimate of the frequency with which respondents used profanity in daily speech. On this measure female respondents reported significantly less use of profanity than reported by males ($t=2.09, df=115, p<.03$). In

isolation such an observation serves as a rather weak indicator of respondent predilection to use profanity. However, in concert with a variety of other measures it assumes greater meaning.

Respondents also were asked to report how appropriate they felt it would be to use profanity in various circumstances. In all but a single instance (the use of profanity in mixed company --the difference was not significant) female respondents said they felt the use of profanity would be less appropriate than males said it would be. Significant differences were found for the use of profanity in formal meetings ($t=3.09, df=109, p<.003$), on television after elever p.m. ($t=2.9, df=126, p<.04$), on Saturday morning television ($t=3.23, df=93, p<.002$), on cable television ($t=2.7, df=123, p<.008$), and in newspapers ($t=2.9, df=131, p<.003$). In an index comprised of all items dealing with the suitability of profanity use, we found females were significantly less likely than males to report that profanity use would be appropriate ($t=2.26, df=127, p<.02$).

3. Perceptions of the Role of Profanity in Language

The next series of items sought to determine if there were sex differences in the perceptions of how profanity served the user. In this review we discovered two noteworthy distinctions. First, male respondents were more inclined than females to report that profanity provided a linguistic tool with which to demonstrate social power of the speaker ($t=2.85, df=131, p<.005$). Second, males were more likely than females to report that profanity helped make the user socially acceptable ($t=2.07, df=131, p<.04$). The significance of these findings can best be realized in light of previous arguments which contend that profanity usage contributes to the dominance of the user, and that it

serves the dual functions of group cohesion and alienation of non-users.

4. Background Characteristics

In order to isolate factors which may account for differences between the sexes in the uses and perceptions of profanity, we explored several issues related to family background and lifestyle characteristics of the respondent.

Based in part on sociolinguistic theories which postulate a relationship between the child's use of language and her/his home language environment, we sought to uncover differences in respondent recall of profanity usage in the home. We found no significant differences between males and females in reports of sibling profanity use. Furthermore, our data shows no sex differences in reports of profanity use by the father. (We did, however, discover that both sexes reported the father used significantly more profanity than the mother used in the home ($t=5.65, df=127, p<.001$). The most noteworthy observation in this series identified a sex difference in reports of the mother's profanity usage. Female respondents report their mothers used significantly more profanity than reported by males ($t=2.78, df=86, p<.007$).

5. Obscenity Ratings of Profane Words

In order to provide a measure of the perceived intensity of profane words, respondents were asked to rate 16 commonly used terms on a six point scale. We logically assumed that females, who reportedly used these words less frequently than males and found them less appropriate in a variety of social, business and media settings, would rate the words more harshly.

Our assumption generally was not confirmed.

In only one category, religious profanity, were there rating differences between the sexes, and here (to our surprise) ratings provided by males were significantly more severe than ratings given by females ($t=2.65, df=129, p<.009$). There were no significant sex differences on ratings of excretory and sexual profanities.

Discussion

Previous writings have staked out the issues concerning language style and its implications for perceptions of the user, and the establishment of user dominance in social interactions. They have also discussed broader sociological issues concerning the relationships of sex role stereotypes and language features, and group maintenance/non-member alienation. Objectives of the present study only deal indirectly with such discussions, concentrating instead on several component arguments which feed into this general dialogue.

If there is a "bottom line" to findings of this research it must be that, indeed, there are sex differences in the reported uses and perceptions of profanity. Women claim to incorporate profanity less frequently into their speech and also express a relatively more negative impression of profanity use on a wide variety of measures. Compared to male respondents, women report greater disapproval of profanity use on television and in formal settings.

In as much as profanity use contributes to perceived "strength" of language, these measures, taken in aggregate, strongly suggest that women are not indistinguishable from their male counterparts. While there is no comparable historical data with which to compare these

findings (in order to determine empirically a shift in the patterns of female profanity usage) we can report only that given limitations of this study, it appears profanity use by men and women are not presently without differences.

In our exploration of background variables we turned up only several items worth attention. We discovered that both sexes report significantly greater frequency of profanity use by the paternal parent. In addition to confirming an intuitive suspicion, it also provides yet another confirmation of profanity use differences between the sexes: males (fathers) are reported to use more profanity, at least in the home environment, than are females (mothers). In terms of sex differences in perceptions of profanity use by parents we observed that while no sex differences were recorded for the father's use of profanity at home, there was a curious difference between male and female recall of the mother's profanity use. Women in our sample, compared to the men, claimed their mothers used profanity more frequently. Could it be that mothers were more inclined to use profanity around their daughters than around their sons? Perhaps the image of mothers retained by sons does not conveniently include the vision of a woman who uses profanity. Perhaps assimilated into responses of sons is the essence of a cultural stereotype that maintains "good girls don't use bad words" (and certainly my mother is a good girl).

It made good sense to expect that people who choose to use profanity less frequently and believe its use is often out of place will be likely to provide relatively more severe obscenity ratings for these words. As we noted earier, for two of three categories, female respondents rated profane words to be no less obscene than did male respondents. More suprisingly, however, was the discovery that while women rated excretory and sexual profanities about the same as men did, it was men who rated religious

profanities most severely.

The finding for sexual profanities was not expected and in the absense of additional data, an explanation remains no more than conjecture. We may begin, however, with the observation that of the three categories of profanity, sexual words were rated most harshly by respondents of both sexes (index of excretory and religious profanities compared to sexual profanities: $t=15.8$, $df=134$, $p<.001$) This finding conforms to previous observations by Cameron (1970) and Baudhuin (1973).

On the basis of arguments presented by several recent writers, we would predict females to be significantly more critical of sexual profanities. At the core of this position is the very nature of sexual profanities which express the anatomical differences between the sexes and characterize male-female relationships in the sex act. Lawrence (1974) contends that implicit in many sexual profanities is the systematic derogation of women. She claims many of the sexual terms evoke an image which is "undeniably painful, if not sadistic,(in its) implications, the object of which is almost always female." (Lawrence,1974:33). Given this position we would expect women to be more offended by such terms; we would expect females to be more severe critics of sexual profanities. Our findings clearly do not lend support to such a proposition.

We did record a significant sex-difference in religious profanity, though, where males provided significantly more severe ratings than females of words like "damn," "goddamned," and "hell." Males and females, in our sample, report about the same religious intensity and church attendance. We, therefore, cannot conveniently attribute sex differences to fundamental religious orientations. This is a curious finding that cannot be explained readily by the available data.

As we suggested earlier in this paper, the immediate issues of

concern to sex differences in perceptions and uses of profanity are the functions of profanity in group maintenance (and exclusion of group non-members), and the establishment of male dominance in mixed-sex interactions. While all of the findings reported here have some implication for these issues, two observations stand as particularly relevant. In our review of the value of profanity to the speaker, we noted:

--males, more than females, indicate profanity helps make one socially acceptable

--males, more than females, indicate the use of profanity serves to demonstrate social power of the user

If males do, in fact, see the use of profanity as a tool with which to bring about social acceptance, they may be inclined to use profanity themselves (to enhance their own social acceptance) and to view with favor others who also use profanity. This suggests that profanity usage may serve at least some role in the group maintenance process. Participants in informal groups may be granted admittance and be allowed to sustain their membership, in part, because of this linguistic "ticket." It follows then (on this issue alone) that females who use profanity less frequently may not meet this expectation of group membership. Findings here suggest that in terms of the issues described by Thorne and Henley (1975), swearing, indeed, may serve to exclude females from traditionally male settings.

In the context of mixed-sex interactions Lakoff proposes that "strong langauge" serves to establish dominance of the user, and that males, who are relatively more frequent users of strong langauge, emerge more often as dominant in these settings. Based on this argument alone our findings suggest that males, who we found to be more prolific users of profanity, stand to be the principle interactant in a mixed-sex

interaction. Our investigation proceeds a step beyond this, however, with the observation that males are more inclined to perceive the use of profanity as a demonstraton of social power. This suggests they may use profanity (in addition to other elements -- interruptions, volume, etc.) to help achieve dominance.

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